



*U.S. Coast Guard Oral History Program*

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U.S. COAST GUARD ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM  
Operation Noble Eagle Documentation Project

Attack on America: September 11, 2001 and the U.S.  
Coast Guard

**Interviewee: MK2 Robert Cummins, USCG**  
Atlantic Strike Team

Interviewer: PAC Peter Capelotti, USCGR  
Date of Interview: 21 February 2002

Place: Atlantic Strike Team HQ

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**Q:** I'd like to start off by asking you how long you've been in the Coast Guard.

**MK2 Cummins:** Eleven years.

**Q:** Active duty the whole time?

**MK2 Cummins:** Yes, active duty the whole time.

**Q:** How did you find your way here to the Strike Team?

**MK2 Cummins:** They were unable to give me anything else on my dream sheet so I had to fill out another one.

**Q:** No no, don't say it like that. (Laughter) So how long have you been with the unit?

**MK2 Cummins:** Two-and-a-half years.

**Q:** Two-and-a-half years. So you've done a few of these drills before 9/11. When did you find your way over to the landfill area?

**MK2 Cummins:** I was on leave at the time and I was actually called the following Friday. I think that was the 14th, and arrived there the 15th.

**Q:** Right to that site?

**MK2 Cummins:** Well, to Edison on the 15th; Edison, New Jersey.

**Q:** Right, and you started working fairly soon after that at Fresh Kills. Is that right?

**MK2 Cummins:** Yes.

**Q:** And what were you doing there?

**MK2 Cummins:** Initially we set up the air monitoring stations around the perimeter of the landfill to ensure that no asbestos or dust was leaving the site.

**Q:** Now that wasn't so much just for the people around there. That was to see what might be going away.

**MK2 Cummins:** What could possibly be leaving the site.

**Q:** Uh huh, and you had more or less of a laundry list of stuff that you were looking for.

**MK2 Cummins:** No. We basically just set up the monitors and were submitting it to the EPA and their people for sampling. So we weren't necessarily looking for specifics. We were working for them.

**Q:** What was that site like when you first got there?

**MK2 Cummins:** When I first got there it was kind of confusing because it seemed like we talked to about ten different agencies and none of them were really able to give us a straight answer on what they wanted and who we should see or what we should do. So we kind of just took it upon ourselves to where we felt the monitors would be out of the way.

**Q:** Were you staying there or were you coming back? Were any tents or anything set up, or were the people just going there on a shift and coming out? How did that work?

**MK2 Cummins:** The only people staying there were the volunteers with their search dogs. The rest, which were all National Guard and the million different law enforcement agencies, they were all shift work.

**Q:** Was there a fence around that site? I mean how did they lay out that camp area there?

**MK2 Cummins:** There's like a main gate and there was fencing around it - I guess just to keep . . . because it was on top of the hill from when it was an open landfill - to keep the paper from blowing off site.

**Q:** What did you see there? I mean how many trucks were coming and going; things like that. I mean what are we talking about; one truck an hour, one truck a minute?

**MK2 Cummins:** I never had a full count of the amount of trucks, but there were always trucks coming and going; a constant flow of trucks, and the backhoes and large heavy machinery moving everything. They basically had a big section at the top, which was a sorting area. So there was about, probably at one time, about five or six different sorting areas that they were just bringing stuff in and then loading it back up. Then there was a separate section where they had all the cars and fire trucks and whatever kind of vehicles they found at Ground Zero that fire companies were going through checking for

personal affects and any bodies. Then there was another section that was all the steel beams from the World Trade Center and the buildings surrounding it. They had a separate contractor cutting that stuff up to process it; to recycle it.

**Q:** I saw that there were apparently areas where they were parking police cars and fire engines and all that. I mean this must had been an extraordinary thing to see?

**MK2 Cummins:** It was. Of course I was trying to stay out of the way of everything, but just to take a look around at everything. The way the weather was at that time we weren't necessarily working or had a shift all the time because a lot of the monitors couldn't be used in the rain. So I mean you may have skipped a day and you would come back the next day and you wouldn't recognize the place. I mean some things were the same but it just kept growing and growing.

**Q:** Did it surprise you the amount of stuff that they were dumping there or were you more or less prepared for it just by knowing how big these buildings were?

**MK2 Cummins:** Well I had a thought at one time when we were out collecting our monitors and looking over on Manhattan from Staten Island, I just had a thought that they were moving lower Manhattan onto Staten Island it seemed like.

**Q:** Yes.

**MK2 Cummins:** I mean since then I've been to Ground Zero and worked there - and it's a big area - but I guess it wasn't all of lower Manhattan but it still . . .

**Q:** It just seemed like that.

**MK2 Cummins:** I mean a constant flow of trucks and barges bringing stuff.

**Q:** So they had both; trucks trucking stuff over and barges coming over . . . and you were there for three weeks and were there fairly early, so you saw this sort of small, well not small, but at least a contained area start to grow and grow, and grow.

**MK2 Cummins:** It at least tripled in the time I was there.

**Q:** Is that right?

**MK2 Cummins:** Yeah.

**Q:** Did you have a lot of liaison with these other agencies or were you guys pretty self-contained?

**MK2 Cummins:** I had noticed some FBI agents who were working there so we'd kind of go there if we needed anything, or to the EPA if we needed things since we were working for them.

**Q:** What's the sense of these people? Did they express how they felt about this at any point? Did they sort of take a step back and . . .?

**MK2 Cummins:** I think a lot of people were, at that time, just stunned and couldn't imagine how it happened or why it happened.

